

Revitalization Moves South

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April 10, 2006

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It already happened in Downtown.

It's happening now on H Street Northeast, and will soon start on the Southwest Waterfront.

But can revitalization really happen in Ward 8? Yes, according to Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton (D-D.C.).

Neighborhoods throughout Washington, D.C., are undertaking massive rehabilitation projects, but such efforts have yet to touch Ward 8, the city's southernmost area that has long been labeled D.C.'s most crime-ridden and poverty plagued neighborhood.

That, government leaders say, is about to change.

"Ward 8 is the place to be right now," said Marion Barry, the former mayor and current Ward 8 city councilman. "We are the last frontier. We are where it's at."

In an overflowing meeting room at a Ward 8 community center last week, officials unveiled their vision for fixing up the neighborhood.

The plan is to move the headquarters of the U.S. Coast Guard to the long-neglected western campus of St. Elizabeth's Hospital.

That, leaders predict, will spur business and retail development throughout the ward's broken streets, creating jobs and bringing in significant taxable revenue that lacks in the area: Ward 8 includes tax-exempt lands such as Bolling Air Force Base and the Blue Plains Wastewater Treatment Plant, so only 962 acres out of 4,000 total acres is taxable.

"It is the first time that the federal government has done major development outside Northwest Washington," Norton said of the city's recent revitalization efforts. "When the federal government comes, in each and every neighborhood that has happened, the presence of the federal government is a magnet."

First opened in the 1850s, St. Elizabeth's Hospital served the nation's mentally ill, one of the few places where they could receive humane treatment in an era when widespread discrimination was common.

The site is rich with important history — the hospital served military members during the Civil War and is home to a cemetery filled with 300 Union and Confederate soldiers. It also features perhaps the city's most amazing view, a dazzling peak known to locals as "The Point," which overlooks the Potomac and Anacostia rivers.

In 1987, a declining number of patients prompted the federal government to transfer control of the site's eastern campus to the D.C. government. The federal government retained the western side, however, and it has since been closed to the public and neglected.

Now it has a chance for rebirth — and that is something only the federal government can do, Norton said.

The site's storied history demands any construction and development follow strict guidelines, and private developers often are unwilling to invest the resources to do so. Plus, developers might not see the benefits of investing in a community such as Ward 8, and that must change, Norton said.

"If the federal government doesn't build there, the federal government is sending a message: Don't build there," Norton said.

Concrete plans for the site remain up in the air, although President Bush did include \$306 million in his fiscal 2007 budget to move the Coast Guard headquarters there, Norton said, a good sign that the project will go through.

"When the president puts money in his budget, that is when things happen," Norton said.

About 4,200 employees will work at the Coast Guard headquarters when it opens, said Capt. Robert Farmer, the commanding officer for Coast Guard Headquarters Support.

Those employees won't just be helping to transform the site itself, either, Norton said. Their presence will demand more business along nearby Martin Luther King Jr. Avenue, including retail, restaurants and residential developments, she said.

"When the west campus comes up here, we want to see new facilities all up and down Martin Luther King Avenue," Norton said.

The avenue also will need more viable public transit, said Michelle Pourciau, acting director of the D.C. Department of Transportation. In the works are plans to install streetcars that would better connect the area to the Anacostia Metrorail station, Pourciau said.

"We need better internal local-to-local connections," Pourciau said.

Martin Luther King Jr. Avenue also has been included in the city's "Great Streets Initiative," which aims to enhance neighborhood corridors by helping businesses and residents improve their properties, Pourciau said.

Not all Ward 8 residents, however, took the ambitious plans at face value. Many who attended the meeting voiced concerns about the project, which mirrored those of residents who live around the planned site of the Washington Nationals baseball stadium.

Examples: Will the revitalization displace many of Ward 8's longtime residents? Who will get the contracts to undertake all this construction? Will Ward 8 residents get jobs, or will work go to people from outside the area? (Even Barry asked Norton about that one.)

Norton said she did not think displacement would be a problem, as the federal government isn't doing anything that would directly force people out.

"Look where Uncle Sam is building," she said. "He's building in his own lot."

Plans for pre-apprentice and apprentice construction training will be part of the development, so the area's young people can acquire the skills needed to jump-start a realistic career, Norton said, which is also revolutionary in itself.

As for the jobs issue? Regulations in development contracts require that a certain number of jobs go to minority workers, Norton added.

For his part, Barry promised the residents he would look out for them, especially for businesses along Martin Luther King Jr. Avenue.

"What we are going to do is bring change," he said. "But we are going to take care of the business owners that are there now."

Norton said the "historic" plans will forever change Ward 8, and for the better. She compared the federal government's journey to the neighborhood to George Washington famously leading his troops across the Delaware River during the Revolutionary War.

"He crossed the Delaware," Norton said. "The federal government has now crossed the Anacostia."